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The art magazine from Gallery Delta



No 26

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Erratum

p.18. We apologise for the fact that the top photograph was printed over the opening sentence of Chiedza Musengezi's review. The sentence in full should read:

"The Heritage Biennale 2000 offered an opportunity for artists and viewers to relate to each other through a total of 131 pieces of artwork that explored a variety of themes."

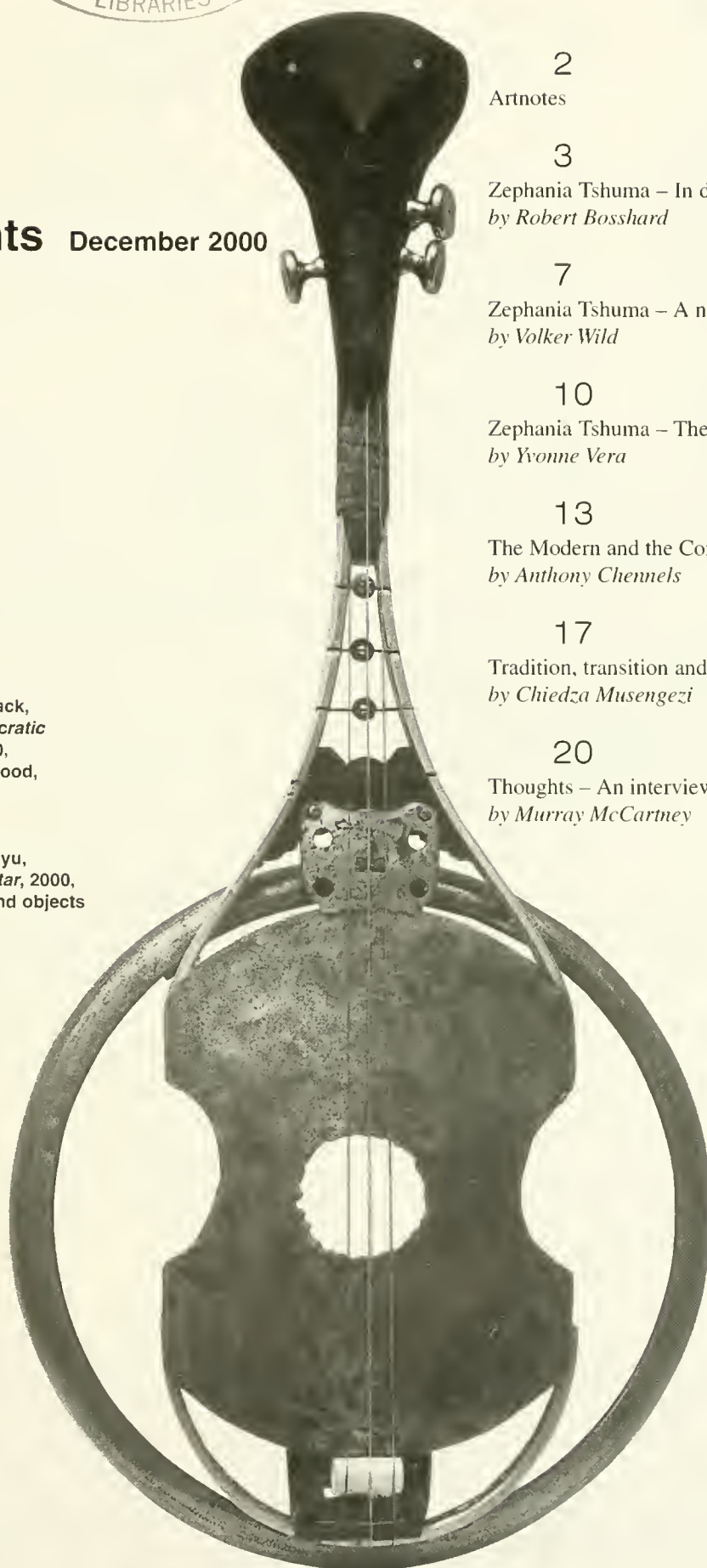
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Contents December 2000

Cover: Richard Jack,
*Unfinished democratic
assemblage*, 2000,
height 130cms, wood,
stone and steel

right: John Gusinyu,
Round racket guitar, 2000,
46 x 100cms, found objects



2

Artnotes

3

Zephania Tshuma – In deadly earnest
by Robert Bosshard

7

Zephania Tshuma – A narrator in wood
by Volker Wild

10

Zephania Tshuma – The stolen secret?
by Yvonne Vera

13

The Modern and the Contemporary in Africa
by Anthony Chennels

17

Tradition, transition and troubles: reviewing the Heritage
by Chiedza Musengezi

20

Thoughts – An interview with Richard Jack
by Murray McCartney

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Artnotes

'Yvonne Vera churns out another powerful novel.'

Thus was a new work of fiction heralded in a Zimbabwe daily newspaper headline six years ago.

The 'churning out' of art is a bothersome business indeed. The independence years have seen acres of 'Shona' sculpture being transmuted into container-loads of sea-freight to meet the robust appetite of Californians for a taste of Africa which lies beyond their experience but within their narrow imaginings.

Painters, too, have occasionally succumbed to the temptation to spin off long runs of a theme if it touches a nerve of consumption in the art-buying public.

And so when something more particular emerges – the *sui generis* creations of a Zephania Tshuma, for instance – we are conditioned to expect, clinging to its coat-tails, accusations of imperial plunder and of the artist's pandering to foreign whims: a colonisation of indigenous art by the *corps diplomatique* and the cultural wing of the postcolonial development profession. Round again come the debates about what is 'popular', what 'tribal', what 'primitive', what – at the end of the day – is 'art' itself.

Zephania Tshuma died late last year. His notoriety resided in several domains. He worked in soft wood, rather than the hard stone favoured by the country's sculptural masters; he spat – be it ever so wryly – in the face of his Christian tutors; the painted colour of his early works faded too fast for art-historical comfort; and he offended against the moral shibboleths of his native culture by speaking openly and very graphically of the unspeakable: copulation, its risks and infectious consequences, its containment by condoms.

A central assault on the 'authenticity' of his production, aside from considering its rootless and impudent singularity, had to do with the belief that many of the carvings emerged from the production-lines of a family enterprise. Who are we to honour, and for what, when the polygamist puts his wives' shoulders to the wheel?

Writing in *Horizon* magazine about his visit to Tshuma's home in 1992, Andrew Whaley noted 'the long list of foreign addresses – almost all German – in his visitor's book...' Whaley characterised the sculptures, in a memorable phrase, as 'a concoction of humanist faith and Biblical-burlesque', and concluded,

In simple, effective ways, Tshuma has crossed spiritual boundaries between Christianity and traditional belief to produce a lengthy narrative in wood that appeals to non-Zimbabweans in art-buying circles. He hopes it will one day be as hungrily received in the heart of Zimbabwean culture.

Disregarding for a moment the extent to which Tshuma did in fact manage to infiltrate the domestic house of hunger, we are bound to acknowledge Whaley's reference to the German axis of interest, and in this issue carry articles by two prominent collectors of Tshuma's work, Volker Wild and Robert Bosshard. A third, Jürgen Blenck, provided invaluable assistance in compiling the material for this issue of the magazine.

That their accounts are more adorned with family detail and rural sociology than is usual in writings about art, should neither surprise nor detain us. Both writers bristled with the antennae of curiosity, and Wild in particular brought an anthropologist's eye to much of his work in Zimbabwe (his doctoral thesis on the history and culture of African entrepreneurs, *Profit not for Profit's Sake*, was published by Baobab Books in 1997).

What of the 'domestic infiltration' by Tshuma's extraordinary carvings? As far as can be determined, it is probably even more limited than that of Yvonne Vera's powerful novels, and for similar reasons.

Vera's own contribution to this issue of *Gallery* demonstrates most clearly that we swallow the myths of production, as well as those of the market-place, at our peril. Conditioned as we are by hearing about the dynastic families of stone sculpture – the Takawiras, Madamombes, Mukomberanwas, Marigas, Mtekis – it is easy to make assumptions about a 'collective' nature of art. As Anthony Chennels suggests in these pages, 'The concepts of both "tribal art" and "primitive art" presume a collective agency for the art: the individual artist is less important than the "tribe" of which he or she is the anonymous agent'.

The voices of Zephania Tshuma's wives tell a different story. To be sure, their initial interest and their developing skills owe much to the patriarch of the family, but beyond that they square their own shoulders: 'I am a woman and I have carved a pot. He has taught me to carve, but the pot is my own. He does not know the talking of my pot ... How can he carve a pot which he has not carried on his own head?'

Chennels concludes his survey of writings about contemporary African art by arguing for an honest acceptance of our colonial history and by challenging the nationalism which demands, quite as stridently as any Western critic, 'that African artists show themselves to be culturally authentic'.

He describes popular art as a genre which defies categorisation as 'authentic' because it is made 'at the peripheries of official society'. The popular artist, he suggests, stands outside tradition and the academy and is an 'undisciplinable' hero.

The words could serve as Zephania Tshuma's epitaph.

But the last word must go to Tshuma's wives: How can *anyone* carve a pot 'which he has not carried on his own head?'

Murray McCartney
Editor

Zephania Tshuma –

In deadly earnest

Their subject matter, as much as their obvious creativity, endeared Tshuma's carvings to a wider audience than is usually enjoyed by Zimbabwean artists.

In 1996 he was invited to Berlin to add a cultural dimension to the deliberations of an international AIDS conference. Robert Bosshard reflects on the visit, and its background.

1 Zephania Tshuma, *Checking AIDS*, 1992, wood and paint

2 Zephania Tshuma, *I use condoms*, 1992, wood and paint

3 Zephania Tshuma, *Checking AIDS*, 1995, wood and paint

4 Zephania Tshuma, *German Man*, 1993, wood and paint

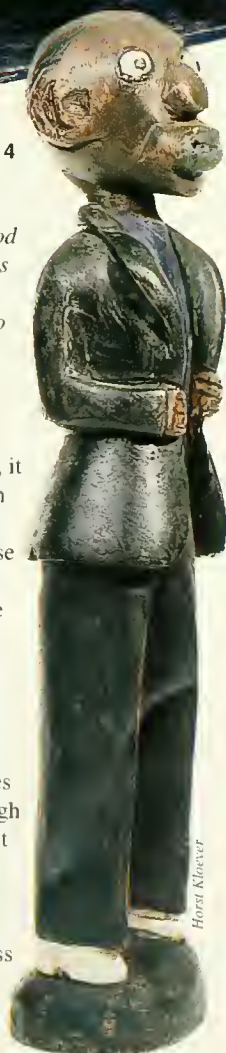


He is a magician. With an axe, he makes dead wood come alive; he fashions vigorous idols from stumps and roots. Zephania Tshuma's reputation is based on finding images for things which no one dares to speak about.

When Tshuma flew from Zimbabwe's equatorial summer to attend the cultural programme of an international AIDS conference in wintry Germany, it was thought wise to accommodate him privately in order to shield him from the foreign surroundings, and the cold. Tshuma's visit was sponsored because his art was regarded as providing a model representation of AIDS prevention messages in the Third World, corresponding to the 'safer-sex' equivalents in the West.

Without the protection of personal hospitality it is practically impossible to overcome the extreme distance between our own House of World Cultures and the former Rhodesia. Rarely do we have enough time to develop friendships; and yet when we do, it brings back warmth into a way of life grown cold.

Tshuma was such a ray of sunshine. He arrived wearing a black suit – crumpled by the flight across the giant continent – and a white shirt in the old English style, surrounded by small bags, smiling

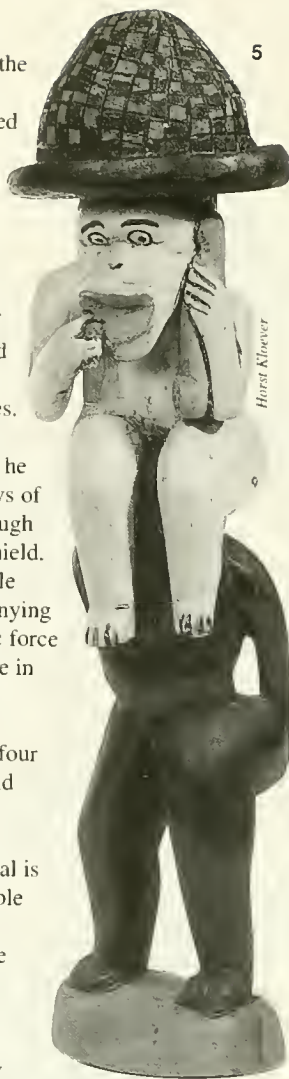


through tiredness at every well-meaning suggestion of his hosts until he finally escaped through the first opening of the visitor's programme. He pulled a piece of poplar from the wood-pile behind the house, sat down on a low, upholstered chair, and asked the little girl who was circling around him to bring an axe from the shed and a beer from the cupboard.

He laid newspapers down on the floor to protect the tiles and worked without a break for eight hours. Four hours followed in the evening, and more the next day. In spite of the tapping and chopping, a marvellous serenity descended on the busy scene, accentuated by the quiet exchange of words which carried on unhindered by language difficulties. By and by, a standing tortoise couple was created, and the sculpture was later named *Marie in Zimbabwe safe*. While he worked, Tshuma explained to the fascinated Marie the ways of the tortoise, who was able to sustain his tender nature through thousands of years of assaults thanks to his phenomenal shield. This animal, he explained, symbolises in his art the Ndebele people, to whom he belonged. Through the story accompanying it, the piece of wood accumulated, hour by hour, the magic force of a fetish. Tshuma's art is created in the same way at home in Zimbabwe.

He lives in a kraal of twelve huts inhabited by three of his four wives, their unmarried children, his disabled brother, his old mother and her ancient blind sister. He is a well respected authority in his area, and presides over the often excitable deliberations of the district council out in the bush. His kraal is in a densely populated part of the country. The village people call on him often. From far away one can hear the regular knocking tune of the carving; it has been going on for more than ten years, twelve hours a day, seven days a week.

Zephania Tshuma's art is not a commodity in the European sense. It aims at releasing the charged relations of everyday life, the situation of a ravaged local economy which is without any industrial facilities or urban infrastructure.



5 Zephania Tshuma, *Phoning West Germany*, 1990, wood and paint

6 Zephania Tshuma, *Refugees in Zimbabwe*, 1992, wood and paint

7 Zephania Tshuma, *Three in One Zimbabwe*, 1989, wood and paint

8 Zephania Tshuma and his wives

9 Zephania Tshuma, *Traditional healer on tricycle*, 1992, wood, paint and hair

10 Zephania Tshuma, *Waiting for the Queen*, 1994, wood and paint

11 Zephania Tshuma, *Sammy Taxi: driver riding on a Renault R4*, 1990, wood and paint



Ehmar Engelbert

Tshuma's art has its origins in local history. He trained as a bricklayer at a Basler Mission. At the time, this was the only way for people in the area to attend school. He started by carving figures of Jesus. But instead of a white man, he put a black man on the cross. Later, he just nailed on a dumb-eyed little hare, or a tortoise, in the same way. In any event, the pious missionaries had soon had enough, and Tshuma was sent back to the reserve. The missionaries had no sense of proportion when it came to what constituted 'authenticity'; they failed to understand that in these early works he was transporting abstract colonial values relatively uncritically into Ndebele culture.

His working space resembles a waiting room, but one without any business premises behind it. Chairs of all sorts line the four walls. There is hardly a moment that nobody sits with him there. He greets visitors from his chair, extends a hand to welcome them, and immerses himself back into his hacking, carving and sawing.

When there is a dance, invited guests and onlookers swamp Tshuma's house. An old car battery provides power to the dilapidated post-war record player. Not loudly, but with a coarse, feverish strength, the South African Soul Brothers constitute the room's standard repertoire: a muffled, reverberating sound, like the stirring of the grasslands.

Each of his four wives represents a period in Tshuma's biography. Each has her own little hut, and her children belong to her. The first wife, 30 years older than the youngest, leads the matriarchy, leaving the patriarch with merely representational duties. The second wife organises the internal system of the family enterprise. She directs work in the second kitchen where the elders are provided for, and which is the favourite place of the children. The third wife is not spoken about; it is not known whether she will return to the kraal again. (In the work, *Zephania Tshuma and his Four Wives*, she is dolefully portrayed as a tortoise.) The fourth wife, still quite young, is passionately trying to attract his attention, as she does not yet have a child: in this culture, having one's own child represents the fulfilment of womanhood.

10

11



Horst Kluwer

When Tshuma talks about the work of his everyday life, he extols the fascination of a culture in an endangered environment. Fears and threats are banished by his wit and irony. Tshuma's art is fetish moulded out of history. In *Trying to Hide for War*, a man, terrified of the fighting, tries to crawl back into his mother's womb.

Insecurity is also spread by increasing shortages of social security provision. With his starkly coloured figure, *Baby Dumping*, Tshuma implores the women threatened by drought not to suffocate their new-born babies like dying embers. He also makes innumerable appeals as an artist regarding the issue of AIDS, one easily suppressed in a prudish society. Whether promoting the use of condoms or warning against promiscuity, his admonitions are based on experience; we only know the statistics: that more than a quarter of the women of child-bearing age in the region are HIV-positive. Tshuma's isn't a frivolous view, but a deadly earnest one. He makes us laugh, in order that we can bear to look reality in the face.

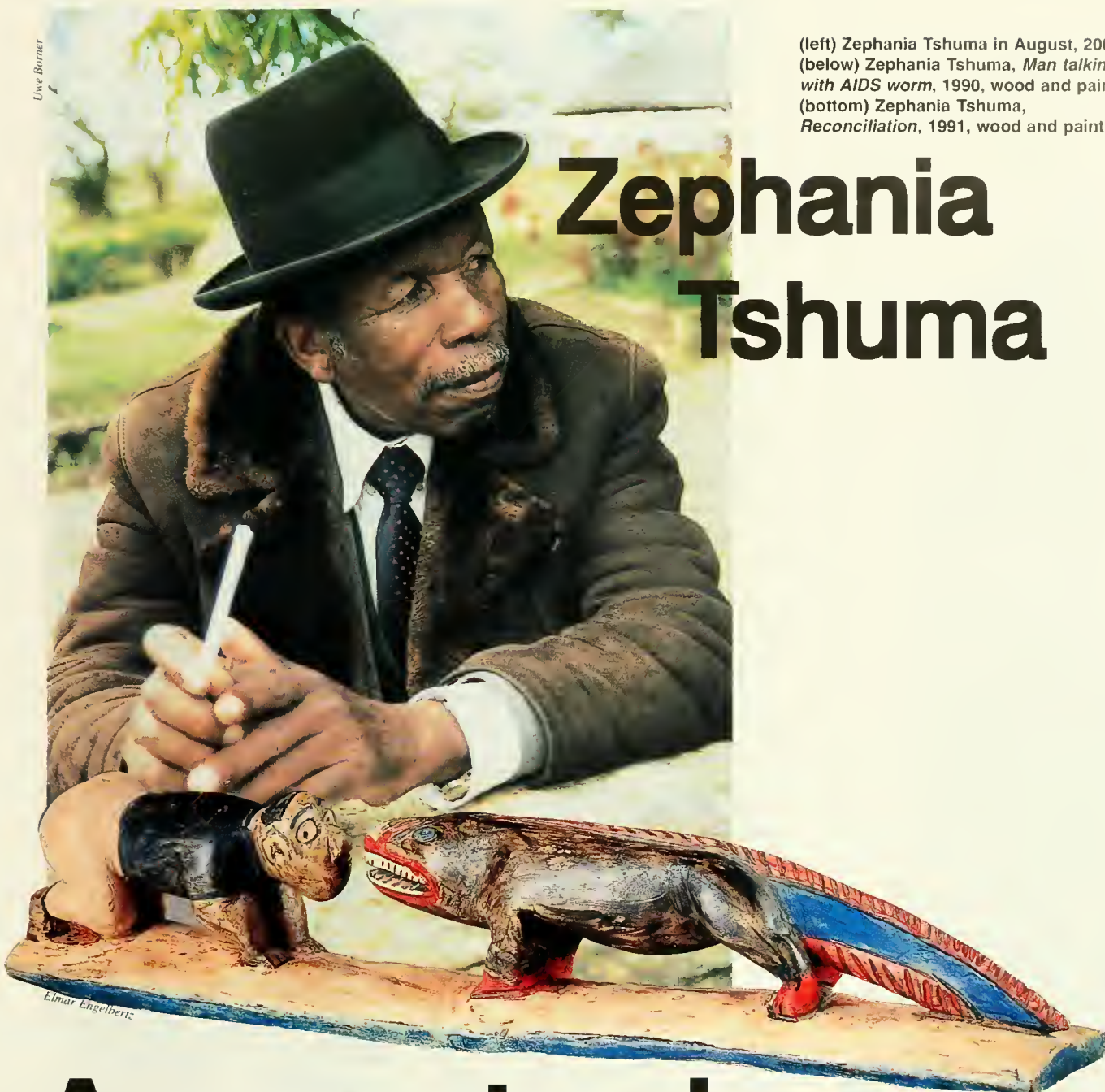
This is an edited version of an article which first appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin*, 29 March 1996. Translation by Flora Veit-Wild.



Zephania Tshuma, *Strong guy*,
1994, wood and paint

(left) Zephania Tshuma in August, 2000
 (below) Zephania Tshuma, *Man talking with AIDS worm*, 1990, wood and paint
 (bottom) Zephania Tshuma, *Reconciliation*, 1991, wood and paint

Zephania Tshuma



A narrator in wood

Volker Wild reports on a visit to the home of the master story-teller.

After about 80 kilometres on the Mberengwa-West Nicholson dustroad we turn left at a signpost reading 'Mbaulo Primary and Secondary School'. Four or five kilometres further on we see another sign, 'Artist Zephania Tshuma'. Zephania Tshuma's village lies at the foot of a kopje. We are expected. The welcome is warm. His relatives, friends and neighbours have come. There will be a small party in the evening.

Within a few minutes the yard between the houses is packed with a large crowd: a baboon on a tricycle, a hare couple in smart green dress, a crow playing the banjo, a pig and a woman singing 'God bless us in Africa'. A procession of fabulous creatures gathers in the light of the setting sun. Stools,



mats, masks, baskets and wooden bowls are brought. Zephania Tshuma, his people and friends worked hard during the last couple of months. Out of harsh necessity, too, because there had been no rains and the crops had withered. On Monday, Tshuma will trek to Mberengwa to buy maize from the proceeds of this weekend's sales.

When Tshuma's work was first exhibited to the general public at the Annual Exhibition of the National Gallery in 1983 it created a sensation: a new world of images, a specific idiom of shapes and colours in Zimbabwean sculpture, genuine and spontaneous, not bound to any tradition, without any model, whimsical, representational but also surrealistic. Who is Zephania Tshuma? He

told the story of his life at the 1984 Sculpture Forum in Harare.

I was born in 1932 at Wanazi Mission, Filabusi District. My father was Tali Tshuma. He was Headman of Chief Maduma Mafu. I passed my Standard 5 in 1951. The last two years I went to Wanezi Mission School. There we were trained in brick-laying, carpentry and agriculture. I left my education. My father did not want the boys to learn, but to herd cattle.

I went to Beitbridge. There I became a messenger at the Post Office. After four years I left the job and went for a building course for three years. I did not finish. So I went to work at many places: Gweru, Zvishavane, Bhangala Dam and Majoda School. Even now I am a builder.

I started as a play, carving small baboon heads and plates. Baboon heads were ten shillings each. One plate was five shillings. I loved baboon heads because they were funny to me, even to my customers. In 1983 I was told that there was a show in Gwanda organised by the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture. I read the Bible. There I found a very pity story about crucifixion. So I forced my mind to carve that story. I succeeded. I won the first prize. The Lord helped me. I was seen by Voti Thebe from Bulawayo Art Gallery. He gave me the address of his gallery.

From there I began to carve bigger pieces: crucifixion, Samson and the lion, rich man and the beggar, lost son. All these were stories from the Bible. Other pieces were: Mr Crow, football players, elephant sugar basin and more. Most of them are from my head and some I dream.

I enjoy to carve animals. I like baboons, chimpanzees, gorillas, tortoises, crows, frogs, snakes and others. They are pretending to talk and to do what we do and play as we are playing. I dislike to carve people. I find I am hurting them. Moreover, when I carving a crucifix it gives me a pity. I am killing a person. I dislike it because I am a member of the Red Cross.

After the Gwanda exhibition came several National Annual and Nedlaw Sculpture Exhibitions in Harare. His work was shown in Zambia and Botswana. More recently, Voti Thebe and Stephen Williams mounted an exhibition of Tshuma's and Thebe's work at the Mzilikazi Art Centre in Bulawayo.

Tshuma is a restless, prolific artist. Within three years he has carved some hundred pieces. His tireless fantasy feeds on everything that comes before his eyes, or his mind. It is especially the twilight zone between the real and the unreal, between the conscious and the unconscious, which attracts him. For example, nightmares: a

man clings to the trunk of a tree; from above and below, two snakes dart out their tongues at him, their eyes flashing lust. The sexual connotations are obvious, but deflected by humour. Or a monster devouring the head of a young girl. *Danger Love*. The title speaks volumes. These ironic tales often have a moral:

Danger Love

At Mbaulo School was a lady called Musa. Her mother and father tried to teach her how to stay with other girls. She did not listen to them. One day Musa went to West Nicholson without telling her mother and father. There she made love with an unknown gentleman. The boy said, Tomorrow we will go to my home. Musa agreed to go without telling her mother and father. So Musa was taken up the mountains. They left West Nicholson at 6 a.m.. Then at 6 p.m. the boy said to her, 'Musa, I need blood from you!' Musa laughed, thinking that he was playing. The boy caught her and Musa was eaten. Girls, mind unknown boys! Listen to your fathers and mothers!

The incongruous and the unusual are a feature of his carvings. Tshuma likes to bind together the incompatible: a smartly dressed gentleman laughs and proudly shows his missing tooth; a tortoise-pig and a baboon dance to music from an old gramophone. The grotesque creates a distance and leaves the beholder smiling.

His crucifixes are no exception. No martyred look on Jesus' face; no ethereal, tortured body, but a heavy, defiant one in running shorts; defiant eyes, full cheeks, and a mouth sometimes smiling, sometimes grim – anything but the redeeming Saviour.

Amongst his best and most interesting pieces are the flat carvings, depicting minor events, which fuse narrative and spectacle into one. For example, *Jimmy the Hunter*. A poacher is about to stab a kudu. A police van appears behind him, driven by a tortoise.

Jimmy the Hunter

At Mabuze school was staying Jimmy and his wife Dezi Nkala. Jimmy did not want to obey government rules. He was very fond of killing animals using wires and hunting with his dog, Sport. On another day while he was hunting, Sport caught a kudu in Tortoise Farm. Jimmy was very happy and stabbed and jumped backwards without hearing the police van coming up behind him! So the tortoise police man got down from his van, shouted to stop killing the kudu. It was too late. The animal was dying. The police shot the kudu and his dog near West Nicholson. Jimmy was sentenced to six years in prison.



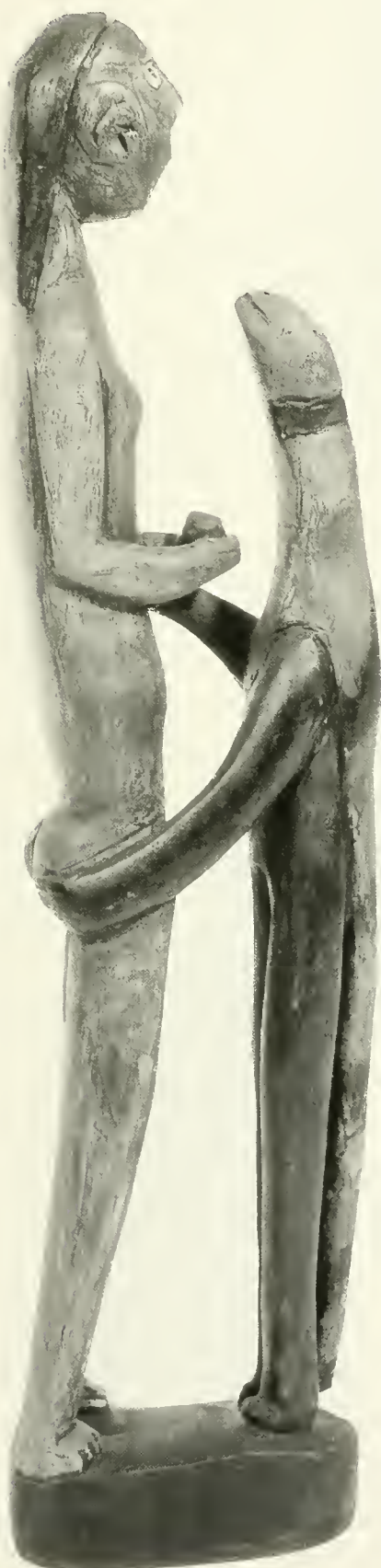
(below) Zephania Tshuma, *Eve and the snake*, 1989, wood and paint
 (right) Zephania Tshuma, *Pig and Friends*, 1986, wood and paint

Tshuma seems to be outside the perceptual aesthetic concept of space and line, of form and surface. He is a narrator, a teller of credible and incredible stories all relating to his rural environment's past and its precarious present in the world of technology. Though depicting the collective images of his people, he responds to the intrusions and irritations of modern life with humour and poetry. The result is a tongue-in-cheek surrealism, a fantasy built out of the associative welding together of disparate figures.

We sleep well this night in the new brick house Tshuma built for his guests. The next morning we visit his father's grave not far from the village by the kopje. There we see the iminyela tree from which Tshuma takes the wood for his carvings. The wood is soft. It is easy to work with. It becomes light if it is dry. Tshuma's tools are a knife, adze (*mbedzo*), pad saw and sandpaper. His figures are coloured. Earlier he used potash, which gave his pieces a matt finish; since the potash has come to an end his colours are now brighter, sometimes even flashy.

Like many Zimbabwean artists Tshuma makes his relatives share his work. His sons fell the iminyela trees and cut them according to his instruction. His wives help him to rough the pieces. Mother and aunt smooth them. Tshuma has trained his second wife, Fumbathani, and his third wife, Maria, to such a degree that they are able to work almost on their own. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish some of their figures from his, while others already display a very distinctive touch. What is happening here seems to go beyond the traditional role of women. Other members of his family weave mats and baskets. Neighbours carve bowls. One day this community might develop into a group of artists and craftspeople – independent yet working together. Before we leave, the women break into song and the men dance. The refrain says: We are proud of you, Zephania. And turning to us: Thank you for your visit. Come again! We promise to do so.

[This article appeared first in *Zimbabwe Insight*, 86/1, July 1986]



Zephania Tshuma, *Rude man sitting on her*, 1992, wood and paint

**The
stolen
secret?**

Forest Khever

In 1996 Yvonne Vera, now the Director of the National Gallery in Bulawayo, visited two of Zephania Tshuma's wives – Rossina Mdhuli Tshuma and Fumbathani Tshuma – at their home in West Nicholson. They spoke of their work as African women artists in a changing cultural climate.

I do not copy art from my husband Zephania Tshuma who is a well known artist. Sometimes he says I have stolen the idea in his head, even if he has not carved it. I tell him that if an idea is sitting in his head maybe it grows its own legs and goes where it wants. If he closes his eyes the idea might escape through his ears. However it is not true. He has never carved a pot.

Ask him if he has carved a pot and given it to a woman saying this pot is the trouble in your head. I am a woman and I have carved a pot. He has taught me to carve, but the pot is my own. He does not know the talking of my pot. Ask my husband he is here. He has not carved a pot. I have not stolen a pot from him. A pot belongs to a woman. How can he carve a pot which he has not carried on his head?

A woman wakes in this state sometimes, in the morning. She wakes and finds that she is carrying a pot. This pot is her head. A pot is a heavy thing to carry above your shoulders without dying. This woman has no neck. Her head has become a pot. This pot the woman is carrying is heavy. Look at this pot round and smooth and made of clay. There is no handle on it. It has many heads under it and I have carved the head of a pig and of a dog and of many other things which a woman carries. I have put a pig because it keeps her safe.

A woman has many heads under her pot. Some of these heads are hers. Some of them are the heads of her children who give her many troubles to carry and change her head in many ways. Some of these heads come after she has had a quarrel with her husband, then she finds another head beneath her pot.

It is very hot under her pot because there is a fire there. It is like that under a pot where a big fire burns while the woman tries to cook, then she knows that this pot is her head, just like that.

Look at the swelling along the woman's belly. Another head is growing there. Perhaps the woman has swallowed one of her own heads and it is growing inside her.

Her back can never walk again. She has many heads which lead her in opposite directions. She has to tell one of her heads to walk backwards if she is to reach anywhere with her troubles. It is not safe to have so many troubles.

The woman who taught us to carve was my husband's youngest wife. She was young. She decided to carve one morning while she was cooking for her husband. She took a stick from the fire and started carving right in the middle of her cooking. She took a small axe and carved a piece of burning wood from the fire where she was cooking. She made the fire into something.

She carved her stick which she was using that morning to stir her food. We wondered at her carving but she laughed and said she

would even teach us to carve. She stole the secret of our husband but it is not a bad thing this stealing. We laughed at her daring youth. Then when we saw the thing she had carved we stopped laughing. We listened. We were astonished. We started carving.

Our husband was surprised and he laughed. He had never seen a woman carving. We carved while he laughed. When he had finished laughing we had finished our carving. This young woman of my husband had a lot of energy but she has now left our home and has gone away. We remember her because she taught us to carve. This was a brave thing and she did not think about it.

Carving belongs to a man. That is our tradition. According to our tradition a woman can only weave a mat and a basket. To work on a piece of wood like this is for a man. It is true we have broken the tradition. We have broken this tradition about carving but it is not bad. The sun is too hot for one to remain with the tradition. We need food and clothing. The sun is very hot in the sky, it burns our eyebrows.

Our husband realised quickly that we were helping keep the burning away from our shoulders and his shoulders, because it is obvious the sun burns more than yesterday. We sell our pieces and things become better. We have to help each other like this because the rain has refused to come.

A woman builds many people, that is why this woman I have carved has many heads. This is my pot. I work according to the state in my mind and my heart. It is true that a woman's body is different from a man's, and because we have been carving like this we can see that the body of a woman is only a carving just like this one, but a man has all the power in his mouth. The woman listens to him. This is not bad because it is our tradition.

I do not become a man because of my carving. If I carve and become a man my husband will say that the carving has destroyed his home and it must stop. The home is more important than the carving. I cannot destroy my home. My children and grandchildren need their home. My husband has all the power of a man. I respect him and help him with this power. I do not want to stop my carving. It changes the power of a man which he has had since long ago. Perhaps my grandchild will have such power because she thinks carving is the tradition of a woman. She has found this tradition here. If my mind can make such shape at a late age in my life it is true that the young mind of my grandchild will travel even further than mine and change the power of a man. It is true.

My head is full of all the tradition of my ancestors and I find myself going back to the tradition because it is me. But this tradition is not true for my grandchild. She has not seen me weaving a basket or a mat. Her eyes have only seen this carving. She will travel many worlds because her mind is new and not dying like mine. I am old. It is true that carving can give women power and our grandchildren



will have much power according to their dream. It is a dream for a woman to have power. We are too old to dream such dream.

The neighbours do not like what we are doing. They ask why we do not make baskets like other women. They say we have become proud with this carving. They say the carving has made us forget all our tradition of long ago. They say we carry witchcraft in our fingers. They say we dream strange dreams and monsters which will destroy our village. It is not good that our neighbours speak like that. We would like to teach them about this carving so that it is no longer the tradition of our home but of our village. People come from all over the world to buy this work and it is known in all the countries so far away. Our carving is good.

If my husband errs towards me I do not ask him difficult questions. I am not interested. If I cannot find words then I am silent. I do not even tell my wood. I just throw the question away. I am only interested in my carving and I do not carve the secret of my home. I can carve about this woman you see in this other piece. She is standing on one leg. I do not know where her other leg has gone. This woman has suffered so many problems that one morning she woke and found that she had one leg left and this leg had to carry her everywhere. She was pregnant but her man chased her away and said he knew nothing about how the pregnancy had entered her. The woman became alone with the heavy thing inside her body. The man had left parts of his body inside her and she wept. She wept so hard she had only one leg left in the midst of all her troubles. This became a terrible burden to her then she discovered that she had also lost her arms. Wings grew beneath her arms. Look at the wings stuck on her body. She wants to fly. That is how it is when one is troubled. The wings were still growing along her body and she stood on her one leg like this and waited to fly. She would fly to the clinic where she could give birth. She had suffered so much she needed wings to carry her. She needed to be healed. It is hard to be a woman if you have no wings.

We have been carving since 1986. Our husband says he does not know how the young woman started carving in her head while she was cooking. He supports our work now. We show our work at the Art Gallery in Bulawayo. Our husband sends his work to Harare and abroad so that there is room here for ourselves and our children to sell our art in Bulawayo.

It is now too far where we older women come from and were born. I cannot even carve an object of love for my husband. Showing love like that is to be a child. I have to be respected. I cannot carve about love and show my husband such daylight love like a child. I have travelled far from such foolish love for a grown woman who has grandchildren. I am a woman who no longer cares about love but wants to be respected by her husband. The head can desire many things but it is better to be respected and to show that the white hairs on one's head are not lying.

The Modern and the Contemporary in Africa

The International Institute of Visual Arts in London has become a fertile nursery for ideas and debates about the theory and practice of art. Anthony Chennells, a professor of English literature at the University of Zimbabwe, reviews the background to some of the debates as they concern Africa, and considers the Institute's latest publication, *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*.

Part of the European Enlightenment's obsession with ordering and therefore knowing the world resulted in Western scholars dividing humanity into biological and temporal categories. The biological divisions categorized the different races; the temporal divisions located these races on some imaginary time-scale of evolutionary competition. Since Caucasian males were doing the inventing, not surprisingly Caucasians were to the fore of this particular contest. These divisions would have little interest in discussions of art today if they did not figure as a ghostly presence in the art markets of the world and did not have a direct effect on how different sorts of African art are valued both aesthetically and in terms of cash. Saleroom catalogues of a few years ago show that there was a category called 'primitive art' and as recently as 1982 the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York opened the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art.¹

Although 'primitive' has been dropped as a term among art dealers, 'tribal' has replaced it. The 1998 edition of *Miller's Antiques Price Guide*, the most influential annual about British and United States sales rooms, included four illustrated pages of 'Tribal Art' which recorded prices paid in the preceding year for among other objects Hopi dolls, 'American Plains Indian buckskin leggings', an 'Ibo people carved wood ancestor figure', an 'Easter Island figure' and a 'Bambara vertical antelope headdress figure'. Primitive may have fallen into disfavour as a word but the category it purported to describe remains more or less intact.² The section that customarily precedes 'Tribal Art' in any edition of *Miller's* confirms that this division is complexly racial. 'Antiquities' in 1998 included 'A British Lower Paleolithic early Acheulian hand axe' along with a welter of Sumerian, Greek, Etruscan, Anglo-Saxon and Romano-Celtic objects. The collecting world has its own ideas about debates on the central African origins of Pharaonic culture however. Not only is there a scattering of Egyptian objects among 'Antiquities' but the section illustrates 'A Nubian painted wooden funerary panel'. Nubia reached as far south as modern-day Khartoum but *Miller's* rescues the object from the merely 'tribal' because the subject of the panel is a young man who is not obviously black. 'Oriental' provides another division in the economy of the antique trade and without it one would assume that every object in the salesrooms not of European or Middle-Eastern provenance belonged to the ragbag of

'Tribal Art'. That *Miller's* separately lists Indian, Chinese and Japanese crafts confirms, however, that the Enlightenment's temporal and racial categories are still in place. Ethnographers always located the peoples of Asia in some middle space and middle time between civilized Europe and the savage remainder of the world.

In the last twenty years many books have discussed the way in which museums and collectors have confirmed these various categories. James Clifford's already classic *The Predicament of Culture* and more recently *Routes* include discussions on museums in various parts of the world.³ A chapter in the earlier book traces the connection between French surrealism in the 1920s and the sculptures of Africa by discussing Paris's Trocadéro and the Musée de L'Homme and Georges Bataille's journal, *Documents*, in order to show how Africa's apparent indifference to realism allowed the theoreticians of surrealism to appropriate African sculpture for themselves.

Clifford argues that 'after the surrealist twenties' reality 'could never again be seen as simple or continuous, describable empirically or through induction'.⁴ The implicit universal humanism of this argument was one of the positive aspects of the interest in African art. The negative side was that viewers had little interest in discovering what an African sculpture specifically represented, believed in or aspired to. As Clifford notes:

*If the notion of the African "fetish" had any meaning in the twenties, it described not a mode of African belief but rather the way in which exotic artifacts were consumed by European aficionados. A mask or statue or any shred of black culture could effectively summon a complete world of dreams and possibilities – passionate, rhythmic, concrete, mystical, unchained: an "Africa."*⁵

According to Clifford the old Trocadéro in Paris 'was a jumble of exotica....its disorder [making] it a place where one could go to encounter curiosities, fetishized objects'.⁶ The new Musée de l'Homme by contrast displayed its 'African

sculptures...regionally along with related objects, their significance functionally interpreted'. For Clifford the rigour of the scientific method which governed the new museum's displays resulted in

*the loss of a disruptive and creative play of human categories and differences, an activity that does not simply display and comprehend the diversity of cultural orders but openly expects, allows, indeed desires its own disorientation.*⁷

I risk giving the impression that Clifford sees no good in the Musée de L'Homme. In fact he points out that the 'guiding values' of the museum's displays 'were cosmopolitan, progressive and democratic' and were arranged in a way which insisted '[n]o one time could claim to incarnate the mankind on display'.⁸ Nevertheless the interpretations and indeed the very divisions themselves remained in the control of the Museum's directors and although the displays may have refused to centre the normative on France the public were only too well aware that what they were looking at were 'aestheticized commodities' and attached cash values to them accordingly. Clifford has led the opposition against those theorists who imagine and essentialize a static culture. In this century at least no culture is likely to be pristine. For this reason, if for no other, one can understand his enthusiasm for a display which disrupts categories and celebrates their interaction.

Shelly Errington's wittily entitled book *The Death of the Authentic Primitive and Other Tales of Progress* usefully accounts for the way in which values were attached to the commodities of ethnographic collections which throughout this century were being turned into art. She has fun playing with the term authentic and provides choice examples like 'Authentic Museum Reproductions' and 'The Look is Authentic'.⁹ Errington sums up the argument of the market and to an extent of the museums as well:

*The message is that once upon a time Africans were great artists, now they are commercial hacks; once they lived in harmony, now they live in decadence; once their work was pure, now it is polluted. Only ancient Africans, like ancient Greeks, stand as worthy ancestors.*¹⁰

'Primitive' and authentic are securely linked in such an argument. Important for the aficionados of the art they have designated as 'primitive' is to claim that such art has a spiritual function or rather to use Errington's more precise phrase that half of the excitement of such objects is that they demonstrate 'Primitive Man[']s...fear and irrational superstition'.¹¹ Since they have no other purpose than to fortify the faithful against vengeful spirits, this pits the art critic against the ethnographer. Errington quotes from an indignant review of the New York MoMA exhibition which argues that 'In their context these objects were invested with feelings of fear and dread, not of aesthetic ennoblement....Their viewers were under the influence of ritual...and often alcohol and drugs'. The art critic by implication has no business looking at them. That the appreciation of 'primitive art' is increasingly in the hands of the New Age constitutes very little improvement. With characteristic wit Errington sees the new enthusiasts replacing

*drug besotted native dancing around flickering fires and terrified of the spirits...with an ecologically conscious people in tune with the Goddess, living in harmony with nature, operating more on intuition than logic, more in touch with the right side of their brains than the industrialized moderns.*¹²

It is not difficult to see what is at stake for Zimbabwean or indeed African art in general when those who control the market valorise the so-called primitive. Most obviously they deny contemporary African artists the right to comment on their contemporary society. The imagined primitive is placed behind history, for implicit in that imagining is a static world, endlessly reiterating the same forms, difference being registered only because 'tribal' particularities fragment the whole. In other words Africa's right to change is denied and more significantly Africa's right to modernity is contested.

Several of these issues are debated in a new collection of essays entitled *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*.¹³ Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe who edited the collection write in the introduction of an Africa far removed from that imagined by collectors and New Agers alike. For them Africa is situated in a context of 'globalisation and diaspora [which] recognize the processes of mass mobility, migration, mediation, information technologies, postcoloniality, economic dependencies.... [These] challenge the containment of Africa as a monolithic entity...and transform the ways in which we approach questions of subjectivity and creative agency'.¹⁴ That last clause is worth dwelling on. The concepts of both 'tribal art' and 'primitive art' presume a collective agency for the art: the individual artist is less important than the 'tribe' of which he or she is the anonymous agent. The image of the artist as an individual standing apart from the dull collectives of the less talented derives from European Romanticism and as Freud appears to have prevailed for the moment against Marx, the artist as individual is likely to remain fixed for some time in the Western mind. The collectors of the 'tribal' and the 'primitive' refuse African artists an equivalent autonomy. Sidney Kasfir, one of the contributors to the collection, quotes a Parisian collector saying 'Once you have found out the artist's name, the object ceases to be primitive art.' Kasfir observes that 'The "primitive" artist of this Africa of the mind, is controlled by forces larger than himself and is consequently ignorant of the subjective feelings of aesthetic choice. In such an equation, the Western connoisseur is the essential missing factor that transforms artifact into art'.¹⁵

Olu Oguibe analyses an interview by Thomas McEvelley of an Abidjan artist, Ouattara.¹⁶ After answering the mandatory questions about where he grew up, in answer to yet another question about his family. Ouattara says, 'I prefer to talk about my work'. Oguibe recognizes such a response as a transgression of the role the African artist is expected to play before a Western interviewer. The latter has the task of raising the art object to consciousness; the duty of the African artist is to create. But the relationship is more circular than this, for the imperatives of the market place apply; Ouattara needs McEvelley and McEvelley needs the book which he will write on Ouattara which will in turn help to sell Ouattara's work. McEvelley has more power and predictably the interview goes as McEvelley wants it to go. Oguibe notes

*Failed is [Ouattara's] effort to displace the critic's gaze onto his work, to specify the latter as the rightful focus of contemplation, and in so doing to claim author-ity. Clearly against his will, Ouattara finds himself repositioned in the frame as the object. And though he is coerced to sketch the contours of this object, to narrate himself and to trace the ethnography of his body, he is made to do so within the confines defined by another.*¹⁷

For Oguibe the 'Other' that Western ethnography identifies and then pontificates on has merely replaced the categories of Primitive and Tribe. All three terms effectively erase the

individual artist. Oguibe goes further than this. As pre-colonial art gets more difficult to source, collectors coming to Africa enthuse over naïve art ignoring more sophisticated art which is familiar to a Western eye. The naïve objects are desirable, Oguibe argues, because they represent 'a slip from [Western] normativity; they signify a coveted distance between the West and the African; they satisfy the desire for the fantastic; they are open to pornographic translation; they are strange.'¹⁸ The collectors and the theorists ask only of African artists that their practice should register difference, for in that difference lies what the West has chosen to see as authentically African.

A curious omission in Oguibe's argument is Africa's cultural nationalists who, in my experience, are as strident as any Western critic in demanding that African artists show themselves to be culturally authentic. In Zimbabwe the most frequent accusation brought against Dambudzo Marechera was that he had imitated European modernism, an accusation which clinched his condemnation. Okot p'Bitek, the Ugandan literary theorist, complained of Westerners collecting African artifacts because

*these so called "things" do not speak in foreign tongues. They have nothing to communicate to strangers, outsiders who are therefore, not danu (Human), because they do not and cannot participate in the philosophy of life that the drums, the rattle gourds, the regalia, the sculptures etc. celebrate. These "items" do not operate in solo, alone, away from home, in the absence of the people who, steeped in the world-view of that society, create them to fulfill definite purposes, but each one is an essential piece of a complete, deeply felt, enjoyable festival.*¹⁹

Oguibe constantly refers to Europe creating the 'other' in Africa but who is the other in Okot's account? Oguibe quite rightly identifies colonialism's desire for 'the faceless native, the anonym...[who] stands for lack.'²⁰ What he fails to recognise is how frequently the nationalist theorist has collaborated in this task by insisting on the primacy of the African collective and policing the particular and limited ways through which Africans must signify. Oguibe speaks of 'the white critical and artistic establishment', a designation which is racist because it assumes that all whites within that establishment possess a single subjectivity.²¹ Any process of 'othering' grows out of racial generalisation. What Oguibe ignores is how *some* cultural nationalists in Africa join with *some* negritude philosophers and *some* neo-negritude philosophers within the African Diaspora and with *some* New Agers of varied racial origins to celebrate a homogenized Africa where communal instincts obliterate all individual difference. Does the 'white' critical and artistic establishment in the United States or France or England contain no representatives from these groups?

Oguibe writes on the contemporary and he and I agree that an aspect of the contemporary in African art is a multiplicity of influences which gives it its diversity. His chapter is a superb analysis of how not only African art but Africa itself is denied its right to modernity. What he chooses to ignore is the range of constituencies which have made ideological, emotional and financial investments in what African art should be. His analysis is flawed by not recognising the diversity of these different dogmatisms. The most important scholars in Oguibe's and Enwezor's collection, however, know that by identifying the different authorities who control such dogmas the complexity of contemporary African culture is revealed. The Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe gently takes to task Pierre Romain-Desfossés who in the late 1940s claimed to have discovered in the work of his Congolese students 'a

Nilotic etiquette'. This seems to have been a sort of racial subconscious which allow aspirant African artists to access the inspiration of Ancient Egypt and which, if they allow these to flow unimpeded, manifests itself in their art. They then can express their 'African Personality' which otherwise would be obliterated beneath the 'uniformising aesthetics of White masters'.²² By contrast, Mudimbe affirms the diversity of art practices in Africa. In a most exciting intervention he speaks up for popular art, in most African countries an urban art, which can be influenced by both tradition-inspired art and European art genres but in the end has made of both or either an art which speaks to a local situation. Because popular art is made at the peripheries of official society, Mudimbe argues that it 'scans, interprets, and occasionally defies [official] values by confusing their explicitness...[Popular art] brings into circulation new readings of founding events, mythologies, and social injustices, as well as popular representations of a history of alienation'.²³ The popular artist who stands outside tradition and the academy is an "'undisciplinable" hero'. Because his or her art represents what is seen and known locally, Mudimbe calls it 'a politics of mimesis'. It is political because 'it questions both art and history' and it is mimetic because the artist depicts what his or her own subjectivity has observed. This subjectivity is undisciplinable because it has been shaped neither by the disciplines of the academy nor the authoritarian discipline of the state itself.²⁴

As famous as Mudimbe is the Ghanaian scholar Kwame Appiah. His distinguished career has been characterised by confronting the logic of those who discover cultural imperatives in race and racial origin. His chapter in this collection is concerned with identifying the shape that the African postmodern might probably assume. Typical of the impudence of Appiah's scholarship is his use of two unfashionable figures – Matthew Arnold and Lionel Trilling – to help to direct his argument. Long before Postmodernism was even thought of or Africa's contemporary culture was seen to be problematic, Trilling remarked of Arnold's *Scholar Gypsy* that his 'existence is intended to disturb us and make us dissatisfied with our habitual life in culture'.²⁵ Such should be the task of the African artist.

Appiah is willing always to confront the pieties of cultural nationalism. In this chapter for example he defines postcoloniality as the condition of the 'comprador intelligentsia', a play on the term 'comprador bourgeoisie', the bogie-men of neo-colonialism, who serve as agents between Western capital and the national bourgeoisies of the African nation states. This intelligentsia consists of

*A relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa.*²⁶

A formulation like this takes issue with the simplistic racial categories which Oguibe saw haunting the world of African art. At the same time any of us who are African and write about Africa (and that includes Appiah) are perhaps performing a task similar to that which he describes. Africa's most vocal cultural nationalist who speaks in the name of the people is probably Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Appiah notes in passing that the theories behind his attempts to 'construct a Kikuyu peasant drama...are irreducibly informed by their Euro-American formation'.²⁷ The point that may escape Appiah's critics (and he has many²⁸) is that he is resolutely anti-idealist and has

always tried to describe culture as it exists on the African ground. Whatever role postmodernism will take in Africa or Africa will take in Euro-American postmodernism, Appiah observes, 'will happen not because we pronounce upon the matter in theory but naturally, out of the changing everyday practices of African cultural life'.²⁹ What makes Appiah's contribution to the debate so original is that because he takes for granted that '[a]ll aspects African cultural life... have been influenced by the transition of African societies through colonialism', he refuses to deal sentimentally with popular art by demanding that it should be true to tradition. Instead he notes that 'a mark of popular [African] culture has been that its borrowings from international cultural forms are remarkably insensitive to – not so much dismissive of, as blind to – the issue of neocolonialism or "cultural imperialism"'.³⁰ More complexly Appiah argues that the 'post' of postmodernism and postcolonialism does not designate sequence or consequence but rather indicates the clearing of a space in which the distinguishing differences of the contemporary can be discerned. This will of course involve multiple contemporaries for again on the ground Africa is multiply diverse. If Appiah believes there is something to recover from those two terms, it is that both provide a space where our diversity can be discerned. Colonialism sought to homogenize, and the postcolonial order should not be trapped into imposing its own homogenizing system through some imagined single African culture. '[T]here is no longer a fully autochthonous echt-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists,' Appiah argues. '...[T]he postulation of a unitary Africa over and above a monolithic West – the binarism of Self and Other – is the last of the shibboleths of the modernizers that we must learn to live without.'³¹ To which one can only reply 'Thank God'.

To write in *Gallery* about the debates surrounding contemporary African art is to use a site that has already defied those who insist that Africa is only artistically interesting before (in Sidney Kasfir's words) 'the advent of a cash economy and new forms of patronage from missionaries, colonial administrators, and more recently tourists and the new African elite'.³² For seven years *Gallery* has identified, analysed and celebrated Zimbabwe's contemporary artistic diversity which of course includes the rock paintings which are certainly anonymous if not unconscious art. By including regular accounts of exhibitions in Europe and elsewhere in Africa, *Gallery* has implicitly refused to locate itself as an interpreter of a centre or to become the mediator between exotic and normative worlds. Culture is always implicated in the multiple sites of political power and resistance to the exercise of that power. *Gallery* has not only accepted that Zimbabwe is negotiating cultural identities but it has actively helped as an agent of negotiation. A quarterly periodical is a peculiarly modern medium and so in the African context is *Gallery Delta* which gave birth to *Gallery*. Both derive from Harare, in a previous incarnation the colonial city and now the capital of the nation state. A quote from Kasfir writing of Dar es Salaam could well be applied to Harare:

[N]ew forms would have been much more difficult in the precolonial past. But the radically different situation introduced by foreign patronage opened the way for invention. In precolonial art, object, symbol and function have been represented as tightly bound up with each other in a highly structured system, leaving little room for either extending or subverting meanings. But the new genres developed under colonialism... feed upon the fluid, highly situational patronage of the African city, not the more predictable needs of chiefs, age grades, and descent groups.

No essay in *Reading the Contemporary* collaborates with colonialism but neither do any try simply to pretend that colonialism is not a part of our history. What the essays do address is what *Gallery* itself has addressed over the years: the capacity of local artists to invent, to extend and to subvert meanings while at the same time being professionals who are perfectly well aware that the artists require patronage in the present just as they did in the past.

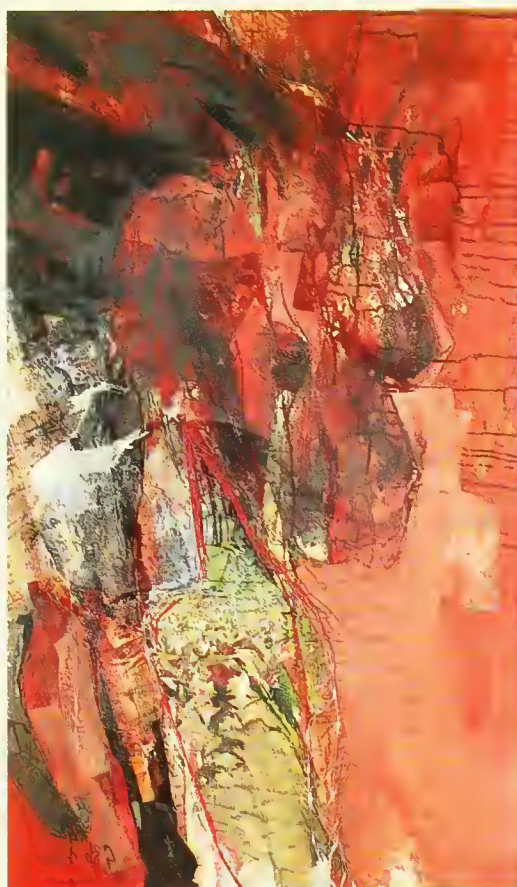
Notes

- 1 Shelly Errington, *The Death of the Authentic Primitive and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 1-2.
- 2 Elizabeth Norfolk, ed., *Miller's Antiques Price Guide 1998*, vol. 19 (London: Reed Books, 1997), 644-6.
- 3 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard UP, 1988); *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard UP, 1997).
- 4 Ibid., 134.
- 5 Ibid., 136-7.
- 6 Ibid., 135.
- 7 Ibid., 140.
- 8 Ibid., 138-9.
- 9 Errington, *The Death of the Authentic Primitive*, 70.
- 10 Ibid., 71.
- 11 Ibid., 76.
- 12 Ibid. 77-8.
- 13 Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (eds.), *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to Marketplace* (London: International Institute of Visual Arts, 1999).
- 14 Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, 'Introduction', *Reading the Contemporary*, 10.
- 15 Sidney Kasfir, 'African Art and Authenticity: A Text with Shadow', in *Reading the Contemporary*, 88-113, 94.
- 16 Olu Oguibe, 'Art, Identity, Boundaries: Postmodern and Contemporary African Art', in *Reading the Contemporary*, 17-29.
- 17 Ibid., 19.
- 18 Ibid., 25.
- 19 Okot p' Bitek, *Artist the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1986), 22-3.
- 20 Oguibe, 'Art, Identity', 20-1.
- 21 Ibid., 18.
- 22 V.Y. Mudimbe, 'Reprendre: Enunciations and Strategies in Contemporary African Arts', in *Reading the Contemporary*, 31-47, 32.
- 23 Ibid., 36.
- 24 Ibid., 46.
- 25 Quoted in Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'The Postcolonial and the Postmodern', in *Reading the Contemporary*, 48-73, 53.
- 26 Ibid., 62.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 See for example Nkuru Nzegwu's attack on Appiah's great work on contemporary African culture, *In My Father's House*. Nzegwu questions whether someone whose mother was English can speak on such a subject: 'Colonial Racism: Sweeping Out Africa with Mother Europe's Broom', in Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell (eds.) *Racism and Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1999), 124-56.
- 29 Appiah, 'The Postcolonial', 71.
- 30 Appiah, 'The Postcolonial', 62.
- 31 Ibid., 69.
- 32 Kasfir, 'African Art and Authenticity', 90.

The National Gallery of Zimbabwe's *Heritage Biennale 2000* is currently touring the country. Chiedza Musengezi, former Chair of Zimbabwe Women Writers and a widely-anthologised author of short stories, offers her reaction.



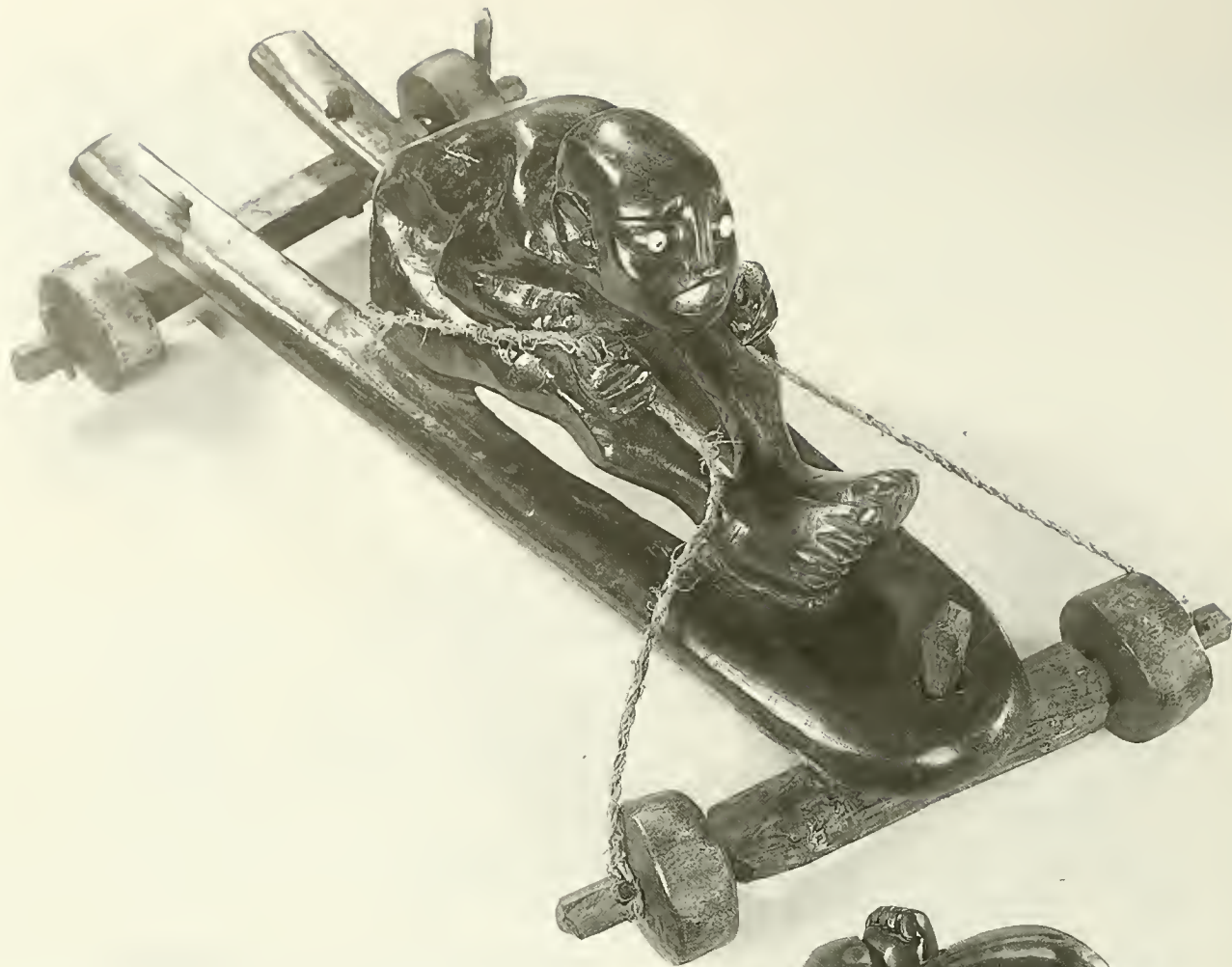
Tradition, Transition Troubles



(top) Manuel Chuma, *Fruit Pickers*, 2000
40 x 59cm, PVA on board

(left) Tonely Ngwenya, *8.00 a.m.*, 2000
181 x 149cm, oil on board

(right) Gillian Rosselli, *Jacques*, 2000
128 x 77cm, mixed media on canvas



to each other through a total of 131 pieces of artwork that explored a variety of themes. It show-cased a number of established artists such as Thakor Patel, Hilary Kashiri and Richard Witikani; amongst the less familiar names, Foni Kofi and Morgan Musorowembudzi demonstrated their commitment to the arts in the face of deepening poverty and political instability.

Musorowembudzi's *Mugudu Riding* received the Mobil overall award of distinction, and stood out from a well-subscribed sculpture category that accounted for a large number of the winning pieces. The judges quite rightly singled it out for 'not only mastery of chosen medium, but originality and freshness of spirit' as well as its 'humorous and relevant interpretation of present day survival in Zimbabwe'. Laughter can make hardships and crises somewhat bearable by pleasantly distracting us from pain. Like Mugudu, we're all tense and stressed as we strive to keep a tight hold on the reins to survive economically or politically.

If the judges conceded that art can arise from expert handling of medium then Samuel Mashari's galvanised and copper wire sculpture, *Widow and Orphan*, deserved to be mentioned. The richly textured, almost life-size work of a woman carrying a baby on her back demanded to be touched and caressed. The smooth surfaces of mother's and baby's faces, the towelling



(top) Morgan Musorowembudzi
Mugudu Riding, 2000, 30 x 71 x 39cm,
ebony

(above) Ronnie Dongo, *Legend of the
Water Spirit*, 2000, 22 x 71 x 29cm,
brown serpentine



(left) Israel Moyo, *Sending All My
Love To You*, 2000, 58 x 62 x 41cm,
scrap metal

texture of the cloth that wraps the baby on mother's back, the hair and the flowing ankle-length dress all demonstrate accomplished handling of medium. Admittedly the subject matter is limited in its exploration of new insights, and hardly goes beyond the realistic, but the title makes an incisive comment on the health of the nation: many women are widowed and many more children are orphaned due to HIV/AIDS.

Direct reference to the epidemic was made by Collin Nyarumba's stone sculpture, *H.I.V. Virus*, which won the Beeld op de Berg award for sculpture. It is a striking piece, with the head of an unrecognisable animal and a human body; the mouth biting the fulsome back of a female is suggestive of the sexual dimension of the virus. John Gusinyu highlights the incurable nature of the virus through his award winning scrap metal work, *Before Death*. It depicts a typical hospital ward scene with a naked emaciated man propped up in bed. A doctor and nurse attend to him in an atmosphere of hopelessness. The detail of the sculpture is captivating. The nurses' braids are scooped up and held in a bunch, the doctor wearing a waistcoat and a striped tie gently feels the patient's body with the tips of his long fingers.

However, not all of the sculptures drew their inspiration from present-day hardships. The water spirit (*njuzu*) remains a favourite subject with artists such as Ronnie Dongo. In Shona mythology *njuzu* is a dangerous being that seduces young girls into rivers and turns them into witches. Dongo's *Legend of the Water Spirit* depicts two mythical figures, a male and a female, in a gentle and flowing movement suggestive of swimming under water. The highly polished

surfaces and the woman's long, sleek hair give the sculpture a wet appearance. The closeness of the figures and the woman's hand stroking the man's back suggest intimacy and affection. Israel Moyo, who has consistently submitted his metal sculptures to past Heritage exhibitions, won the BOC Weld Art Award merit with his piece, *Sending All My Love to You*. I found it a heart-warming work. A guitarist curled up in a sitting position plays a song for his love. The detail on the guitar head, perched on a bird, emphasises the love message.



(below) Tapiwa Matsikire, *Victims of Cyclone Eline*, 2000, 42 x 53cm, oil on card

(bottom) John Gusinyu, *Before Death*, 2000
72 x 88 x 61cm, scrap metal



'Heritage' implies an assertion of one's roots, or traditions. At a time when identity seems under threat one may derive security from traditions. Foni Kofi's winning painting, *Zimbabwe Traditional Culture*, embodies the spirit of heritage. It presents a collection of the hallmarks of our material culture: ceremonial axes, mbira, snuff containers, granary, hut, hoe, and cattle. No one item is dominant, but each is given space and colour of its own, perhaps underlining the importance of each in achieving a harmonious existence. The subjects of Tonely Ngwenya and Tanyaradzwa Chihota offer a contrast, with scenes from everyday life: a newspaper vendor serving a customer, a farm-hand feeding ostriches. Tapiwa Matsikire's *Victims of Cyclone Eline* reminds us how severe the weather can be, with powerful floods sweeping away huts, trees and people.

From the midst of our economic and political instabilities, the Heritage Biennale 2000 brought a glimmer of hope to many viewers with works which offered new possibilities for our development. Cosmas Shiridzinomwa's *Placard for Zimbabwe*, for instance, presents an unequivocal rejection violence and intolerance: along with many other artists, he shows us the way to a prosperous future.

(opposite page) Richard Jack, *Gathered by the river*,
2000, height 90cms, serpentine
(below) Richard Jack, *Under Pressure* (front and back),
2001, 41 x 67cms, serpentine and steel



Thoughts



Richard Jack will soon be holding his first one-man show in Harare since 1997. He spoke to *Gallery* about his work, and his thoughts.

Richard Jack became a pioneer of mixed media art in Zimbabwe when he returned to the country from South Africa in 1981. After studying art in Durban he worked in advertising for a few years, but its apparent meaninglessness in the conflict-ridden apartheid environment encouraged him to become a full-time artist. His homecoming coincided with Tapfuma Gutsa's return from studying in London, and between them they offered up a palette of challenges to a local sculpture scene mired in the heritage of its mid-century origins.

The anti-apartheid stimulus has long since waned, but does politics remain a concern?

At the moment I think it's influencing my work a lot more ... when I was living in South Africa it was the main direction of my work. For several years after that, I tried to keep away from politics, looking at my work more as a pure art-form, an expression of different ideas; but now, due to the situation, the political content of my work is much stronger. I look at it more in terms of the effect on society, and on people, than the actual politicians.

A lot of the stone work this time is groups of figures: blanketed, wrapped, so that they're very close – supporting and comforting one another. The blanket is a very simple form, around the figures; the main concentration is in the heads, and the expressions.



Does it make much difference to the nature of the form whether you're working in one medium or another?

This time, the amount of wood I've used isn't that much; more important is the way I've used it in the group of figures; I've basically used sticks... letting the natural form of the wood symbolise the elongated figures, and just worked in small elements. Wood is a much more flowing material to work with, whereas stone is in its nature very heavy and solid. But the metal work – that's very

different in its feeling because it's such an aggressive material, in the colour, and the hard angular forms. So I think the difference between the metal and the stone is very strong.

I use a lot of the natural texture in the wood and stone; the areas that I do carve, are concentrated areas, and often very realistic – well, in some elements at least.

*But a lot of your work isn't particularly realistic.
You don't think that you sometimes leave too much to
the viewer's imagination?*

This has something to do with the actual art form of sculpture, with the object one's dealing with ... the material itself, and the way you work it, are also very important in terms of creating the form you're looking for...

Do you always know what that is?

No. Because of the way I work ... a lot of what I do is quite spontaneous. Although I'll have a certain direction that I'm working towards, often things happen as I'm working which suggest new ideas. I work over quite a long period of time, and then look again at the piece, often for up to a month or two, before I work on it again.

Can a piece ever be definitely 'finished'?

One works towards an exhibition, so you've got a time limit, and there comes a point where you have to stop. Luckily, this time I've worked over such a long period, the majority of the big work I've taken to almost the final conclusion, so it's just a matter of small areas that I'm finishing off. But while I was working, I was taking a long time in between, because I've switched from one piece to another, working on four or five at a time, leaving some aside and just looking at them... because they're all around me, I'm continually aware of them, seeing them under different conditions, different light, and other ideas come to you, which you can analyse, and simplify down to those you think to be the most important.

*What about titles? Do they come to you?
Or sometimes not come to you at all?*

Sometimes they come to me, but invariably they come to me very late, often towards the end of a piece.

*Do you think it matters much what you call
something? Is the title a signifier for the viewer?*

I think this is where the political environment has influence. Because of the violations which were going on against people during the constitutional referendum and the run-up to the election, this was affecting the titles of quite a lot of my work: Displacement, Insecurity, and so on. I think it's important to be quite direct with these pieces because I don't want people to misinterpret them.

*You don't feel anxious about creating work which
reflects the violence that's going on?*

I think it's important that I'm aware of it, and that it's coming through in my work. Because I feel so strongly about it, that's why I'm doing these works and giving them those particular titles. It's not only political violence locally; you can look internationally and see the displacement and the violation of people that's going on all over the world.

*Does it matter to you if your work sells? Does it
matter where it goes?*

I rely on my art for my income. It's important to sell, because you have to survive, and support the family. But because you're committed to expressing your intuition, and your own feelings, there's always a conflict: of trying to stick to that, and yet having to sell something because of the everyday pressures. Do you make something that's more saleable? Do you reduce your prices? Where does one compromise?



(opposite page, left) Richard Jack, *Displacement*,
2000, 116 x 24 x 20cms, serpentine
(opposite page, right) Richard Jack, *Children*,
2000, height 124cms, steel
(below) Richard Jack, *Unfinished democratic assemblage*,
2000, height 130cms, wood, stone and steel



How about selling overseas?

One has to get international exposure. At least the prices there are reasonable. Here, because of the devaluation, the prices have gone absolutely crazy. A thousand US dollars is now sixty thousand here; for somebody in Europe to pay a thousand dollars for a sculpture is not a lot of money. But then you've got the problems of getting there, promoting yourself, finding the galleries, all of which involves considerable expense. Unfortunately, I've never had support from the buyers that support the stone movement here...

Is that because you're white?

... for some time it was quite a serious problem – expatriates were wanting to buy local art, and because of the marketing of the stone sculpture that was what they were looking for. In the last few years, there's been a breakaway from that, towards the mixed-media, more conceptual work that I've been doing; I've found it a lot easier, people have definitely shown more interest, maybe because they've become so saturated with the stone that they're now looking for more serious work. And this is a problem: I think the modern movement of sculpture here has largely been overlooked.

Most sculpture has been sold as an ethnic, traditional art form, even though the form was created by whites; the ironic thing is that as a white sculptor, they don't know how to market me because my works are a mixture of the conceptual, the African influence, the western modern influence. My ideas, my influences, come from Africa...

We look around the garden, and take in the group of metal figures standing nearby. When you're working with scrap metal, do you ever think of 'finishing' it in some way, polishing it, galvanising it?

One or two of the pieces have been waxed, and then burnt, which makes them more weather-resistant. But it also changes the colour. They become very dark, and monochrome, whereas I think the rust has such variation in colour, and I really like that.

The reference to weather-resistant metal led us on to considerations of sculpture in public spaces.

There are a few examples of public work, but it's not something that's been talked about much, or promoted. Domic Benhura's recently donated a piece to the city; I worked on a big piece with Tapfuma several years ago for Warren Park Community Centre, but that wasn't put up. Adam Madebe's done one for Construction House. And there are one or two down First Street Mall, but those are so old that they're completely out of date.

And in buildings?

I've done one public piece for the National Sports Stadium, which was used around the base of the cauldron; that was eight panels, of geometric African patterns, symbolising ten or twelve sporting disciplines. It was similar to the design I did the entrance to Danhiko School. I did another piece, for Prince Edward School, but that I did at the school, with the students.

It's an issue that really should be brought up. One thing I notice, for instance, is that if you walk down First Street there are huge black granite dustbins which must have cost, when they were made several years ago, ten or fifteen thousand dollars each. At the time, I thought to myself, Why wasn't money like that put into public art? I noticed when I was in Europe last, in Germany and Holland and Denmark, when you walk around the towns there's lots of public art – sculptures and murals – and it's very stimulating.

Unlike the local scene...?

Well, it's been affected so much by the social and economic problems; maybe even the quality of the work is being affected – everybody's feeling quite down; you can see it in a lot of people's attitudes ... you have exhibitions and very little work sells, so people are quite despondent.



*Does Richard Jack feel despondent enough to leave the country?
Well, not permanently, but ...*

I'd like to go and work in Germany for three months or so ... just to get that stimulation of a different environment; our own environment is becoming so disturbing and oppressive that you just want to get away – not to wake up every day and have to think of politics, and the cost of living; you want other things to think about; as an artist, there's so much more to life than being trapped in a situation.

When you go away on such a 'retreat', do you find that the work you do there is still 'about' here, but perhaps done in a more reflective way, or do you connect to the new environment that you're in?

Some of the work was influenced by the place I was in, but it was also a continuation of what I had been doing here. For instance, I made a series of baskets here, in reeds and stone and wood. While I was in Germany, I made a basket, but it was a fish-basket because we were near the sea: I placed a flat-fish onto the surface of the stone, and then made the basketwork with steel, and wove willow into it rather than reeds. So it had a similar feeling to what I'd done here before.



The figurative work that I did there was influenced by the much more dense urban environment; it was much more solid, more geometrical and structural like the buildings where we were staying.

Does it have much influence on people, do you think, to see art that absorbs and plays back the social and political tensions around them?

You don't see a lot of it here. Most artists avoid direct political confrontation in their art. At the beginning of the nineties, my own work wasn't political, I'd got away from that, it was more philosophical, more playful and joyful. But it's good to challenge the public, to show them that art is not just a pretty picture on the wall or a 'pleasing' sculpture. It should also stimulate some very serious thoughts, make people question what they're looking at, and what's happening around them.

(opposite page, left) Richard Jack, *Violation*, 2000, height 125cms, serpentine
(opposite page, right) Richard Jack, *Wrapped*, 2000, height 36cms, serpentine
(above) Richard Jack, *Phantom*, 2000, 60 x 80cms, serpentine

All photographs by the artist

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